

Enhancing Teacher Leadership in Urban Education: The Oak Park Experience

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School reform currently occupies a prominent place on the political and social agenda in the United States. Issues such as high-stakes standardized testing, school choice, and other forces of change have intensified pressure on the public schools to increase student achievement. Unfortunately, school districts serving the largest percentages of African-American and Hispanic children—and families of all races living in poverty—continue to perform well below average on national assessments (U.S. 2002), despite decades of efforts to reverse this trend. The inability of federal and state mandates to effect change in low-performing districts has been particularly frustrating for politicians, who have recently begun to use more punitive approaches to reform such as the state takeover of the Detroit Public Schools in Michigan (Keller 1999), and the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. 2003). Thus, for an increasing number of districts in urban areas, developing the internal capacity to improve school performance and increase student achievement has become a matter of survival.

This article describes a long-term effort to improve student achievement in an urban school district through a unique school-university partnership. The Oak Park School District in Oak Park, Michigan, collaborated with Western Michigan University (WMU) to design and administer special master's and doctoral degree programs for nearly half the district teachers. Several features distinguish the program from other school-university partnerships. First, the partnership idea, including all early planning, originated with the school district and not the university. Second, the academic content of the degree programs transcended the university's set curriculum to address teachers' needs. Third, the focus of the degree programs changed from pedagogy to educational leadership. Finally, there

was a practical factor: the school district and the university are separated by 150 miles. This article describes the history and evolution of the partnership and provides a brief overview of its successes and shortcomings.

Overview of the Partners

The Oak Park School District is located on Detroit's north side. The district enrollment is 4,200, with four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The student population is 75 percent African American and 20 percent Middle Eastern (mostly Chaldean), with smaller percentages of Appalachian whites and Vietnamese and Russian immigrants. The students come from all socioeconomic levels, but nearly half live at or below the poverty level. Ten percent of the students receive special education services, and 11 percent are enrolled in bilingual programs. The district employs approximately 210 teachers.

WMU is a large public university, consisting of nine colleges with a total enrollment of nearly 30,000 students. The main campus is located in Kalamazoo, and there are seven regional centers throughout the state. The WMU College of Education includes approximately 2,600 graduate students, with almost 800 enrolled in various master's degree programs for in-service teachers.

A History of Reform in Oak Park

The Oak Park schools face many challenges typical of urban districts. Half the district's ninth- and tenth-grade students earned below-average grades for the first marking period of the 2000–2001 academic year. In addition, nearly half of eleventh-grade students and one-third of twelfth-graders earned less than a "C" average. Many of these rates can be traced to student absenteeism, the failure of students to complete assignments, and the subsequent inability to score well on exams. These factors, however, are merely symptoms and fail to address the underlying causes of student failure.

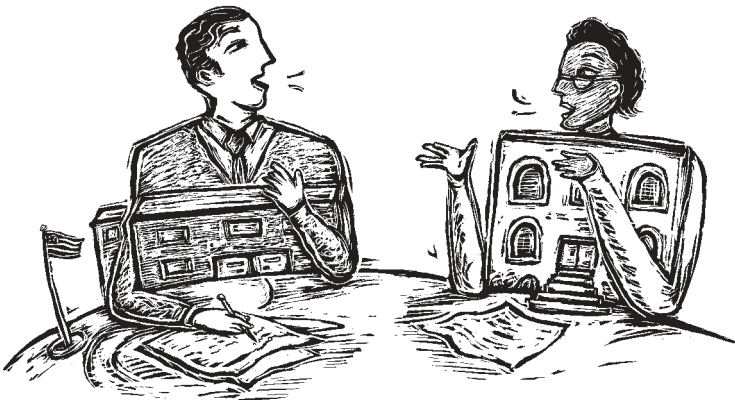
The Oak Park schools consistently ranked among Michigan's lowest-performing districts during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as measured by the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test. In 1992, only 15 percent of the district's fourth-grade students performed satisfactorily on the MEAP tests in reading and mathematics. Twelve percent of seventh-graders had satisfactory MEAP reading scores, and only 5 percent of tenth-graders had satisfactory mathematics scores. To rectify that situation, the board of education and the superintendent developed a formal partnership with Consumers Energy, a major Michigan utility company. Together, the school district and the utility implemented a systemwide reform initiative, the "Sixteen-Step Strategic Planning Process" (see Porter 1995; Marx, Hunter, and Johnson 1997). Using this model, the district first

established performance standards identified by a group of education stakeholders from the community; then it developed a long-range improvement plan for areas with unsatisfactory baselines. The plan set performance goals for students and teachers as well as for administrators. District- and school-level organizational structures were aligned with the performance goals, and profiles of achievement data were used to track performance at regular intervals. The plan, funded by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, included intensive training programs for administrators and teachers in data-driven decision-making.

Immediately following implementation of the improvement plan, MEAP scores more than doubled at all levels, fiscal integrity was restored, and high school graduation rates increased. However, following these initial dramatic gains, subsequent gains slowed and in some cases declined, with the MEAP scores remaining below the state average for most grades and content areas.

Partnering with Western Michigan University

Analyzing student-performance and program-effectiveness data, Oak Park school officials determined that the improved scores had resulted largely from individual student remediation, with little change overall in the everyday practices of teachers and administrators. District administrators concluded that in order to improve student performance consistently over the long term, future initiatives must provide teachers with meaningful professional development that would increase their content knowledge and improve their skills. The possibility of utilizing a master's degree program to support teacher learning emerged. Unlike traditional teacher in-service programs—short in both duration and lasting effects on classroom knowledge and skills—a joint university-district master's program could improve student performance through experiences grounded in the district curriculum and the teachers' daily work.



Oak Park administrators recognized that although such a program would require major changes in graduate school instruction, it would engage teachers in intensive, cost-effective professional development directly benefiting the district. The district established two conditions for the program. First, success would be defined by the university and school district's joint ability to demonstrate improved student performance. Second, course content would have to be presented in a way that teachers would perceive as relevant to their everyday needs and contexts. The first condition would keep the focus on improving student learning, while the second would reinforce the job-embedded nature of the envisioned program.

After presenting this vision to several universities, the Oak Park School District reached a partnership agreement with the WMU College of Education. Because the shortcomings of traditional master's degree programs for in-service teachers were well-known (e.g., Imig 2000; Miller and Stayton 1999; Tom 1999), university faculty and administrators saw the experiment as a unique opportunity to reconceptualize university-based professional development for teachers focused on districtwide school improvement.

The First Cohort

The program's initial cohort included thirty-two district employees, including twenty-four relatively new elementary (K–5) teachers. The remaining eight participants were more-experienced teachers and administrators interested in completing the two-year degree program. The school district not only provided participants with required textbooks but paid the tuition and fees associated with the program. The expenses incurred were only slightly higher than the hourly stipends needed for workshops in a thirty-six-hour degree program. However, unlike a typical series of school-sponsored workshops, the program offered teachers potential long-term professional growth. With professional development offered in the context of a university program, the teachers could complete outside projects and other assignments related to their course work without violating contractual provisions regarding workload and compensation.

Early in the partnership, a planning team consisting of teachers, school administrators, and university personnel decided that improved reading instruction in the district was their priority. The planning team adopted a balanced literacy approach as a model (e.g., Cunningham, Hall, and Sigmon 1999; Fountas and Pinnell 1996, 1999, 2001), and the master's degree program became known as "the reading cohort." Over time the reading cohort evolved into a forum for sharing ideas and a general support group for teachers implementing balanced literacy teaching

in their classrooms. One important outcome of the program was the emergence of teacher leaders who assumed critical roles in systematically changing reading instruction at each elementary school.

The reading cohort generally met at least once a week for three hours. Class sessions were structured more like a series of ongoing, connected teacher workshops than like a traditional college course. The content was planned and organized week to week by the Oak Park assistant superintendent and a university co-coordinator—always in direct response to the teachers' expressed or implicit needs for a balanced literacy approach to reading and language arts. Over the course of two years the teachers received instruction in such areas as leveling books, keeping running records, undertaking inquiry-based lessons, and conducting action research in their own classrooms.

A variety of personnel, including university faculty members, outside consultants, and district personnel, taught the first cohort. Because of the distance between WMU and Oak Park, only two university faculty members were assigned to Oak Park as part of their regular course loads. Other faculty members were enlisted to lead particular sessions as needed and thus not required to travel to and from Oak Park weekly.

The courses were, to some extent, modularized and focused on specific, long-term objectives, a practice seldom feasible in traditional in-service teacher workshops. For example, the planning committee, in line with the district's goals, decided that the initial tasks should be helping teachers develop more systematic classroom reading assessment and harmonizing data collection and analysis across the district's four elementary schools. A university faculty member then led several sessions on those topics as teachers implemented the procedures in their classrooms. Later in the program, after formal introduction to the action research concept (Mills 2000), cohort participants formed teams to systematically explore issues they encountered in their classrooms. For example, one teacher undertook comparative case studies of how two new Chaldean students in his first-grade class learned English. Other teachers documented and analyzed their shift from traditional basal approaches toward a balanced literacy approach in reading and writing instruction.

Overall, the reading cohort enabled the Oak Park teachers to grow professionally, take risks, and improve classroom instruction. For example, after the first year of the program, one teacher wrote:

The biggest change in my classroom this year is that I am willing to try new things. When something is brought up and discussed, I try to think how I can implement it with my kids. It used to be that I would think that this won't work with them or they would never be able to pull it off. I now feel that I have the

confidence and the support of the other members of the cohort to try just about anything in the room.

In addition, many teachers mentioned the value of the support and encouragement the cohort furnished. As one teacher explained, “When faced with those who live with the ‘status quo,’ doing things at a level of static sameness, I know that . . . my fellow cohort members [and I] are acting as agents of change.” The changes were reflected after the first year in the district’s fourth-grade MEAP reading scores, which for the first time exceeded the statewide average.

Two Additional Cohorts

After the members of the reading cohort finished their two-year master’s degree program, Oak Park and WMU officials were eager not only to provide the graduates with continued professional development opportunities but also to create new opportunities for other teachers in the district. Oak Park and WMU officials decided to begin a second master’s degree cohort and to initiate a doctoral degree cohort for district teachers who already held master’s degrees. Approximately thirty teachers volunteered to join the second master’s cohort, while forty-five volunteered for the doctoral cohort. Unlike the original cohort, which consisted almost exclusively of elementary school teachers, the two new cohorts included teachers from all grade levels, thereby creating a truly districtwide intervention.

Although the structure and format of the two new cohorts were similar to those of the first cohort, their focus was different. Rather than address pedagogical issues, such as reading or math instruction, Oak Park and WMU officials decided for several reasons to shift the focus to educational leadership. First, there was the issue of aligning the Oak Park program with WMU’s on-campus degree programs. Because WMU did not already offer doctoral programs in reading or math education, it would be logistically unfeasible and politically undesirable to create such programs solely for Oak Park. Neither WMU nor Oak Park wanted a doctoral program that would be perceived as offering anything less than an “authentic” Ph.D. If WMU’s well-established Ph.D. program in educational leadership formed the basis of the doctoral program in Oak Park, the new program would be perceived as possessing the same rigor and legitimacy as the on-campus program.

Second, there was an important practical reason for shifting the focus toward educational leadership. The first year’s dramatic rise in the reading cohort’s fourth-grade MEAP scores had seemed to ensure steady, sustainable improvement if followed by a second year focused specifically on reading instruction. The unexpected second-year decline in the scores was, however, in line with Oak Park’s long-term pattern of erratic

year-to-year MEAP scores. One explanation may be the district's annual student turnover rate of 15 percent; only 25 percent of the district's fourth-graders are still enrolled in the district by the eleventh grade. In that fluid context, achievement gains are difficult to sustain. Another explanation lies in the tensions that occur when any organization attempts to change (Dolan 1994). A gap emerged between the balanced literacy approach of the reading cohort and the existing program, in which other teachers (and administrators) were vested. In some ways, efforts to oppose the new program were unconscious and perhaps better described as well-intentioned interference. For example, systemic issues such as scheduling, materials, and allocation of resources—all designed to support the old program—were significant barriers for districtwide curriculum change.

Third, and most important, the decision to shift the focus from pedagogy to leadership rested on theoretical underpinnings provided by scholars such as Maslow (1954), Herzberg (1966), Senge (1990), Owens (2001), and Kouzes and Posner (2002). They maintain that change and increased productivity can be obtained through effective leadership practices; understanding motivation; creating a shared vision; setting measurable goals; and establishing honest, two-way, nonthreatening communication among all stakeholders. In essence, effective leaders know how to motivate people, build consensus, and develop a culture of shared responsibility. In Oak Park, sustainable change required transforming the traditional hierarchical roles of teachers and administrators into a more collaborative relationship. Like Maxwell (1998), the program's developers understood the concept of "leadership" as transcending formal titles or positions. In any school, teachers with or without formal leadership positions can enjoy greater community influence than do their administrator counterparts. Thus, in essence, the Oak Park program's focus on educational leadership sought to empower teachers to act as leaders—thereby improving communication among teachers, administrators, and parents and establishing a culture in which questions are asked, data are examined, and the responsibility for student achievement is shared among all stakeholders.

Some Successes and Shortcomings

There are no magic bullets for reforming urban schools and improving student achievement. Spending large sums of money is not a realistic approach, and instant success is not a realistic expectation. Nevertheless, positive changes have occurred. The middle school principal and teachers have begun to collaborate with one another, a sense of community and shared responsibility has developed, and faculty morale has risen. For example, when all 210 teachers in the district were

asked to evaluate the program anonymously, one teacher who was not a member of any cohort wrote, "I see and feel a new energy in our building since the cohort program started this fall. The enthusiasm of the cohort has spread, I believe, throughout our building."

One of the most obvious effects has been increased respect, collaboration, and even passion among participants. Educators openly discuss student achievement, parenting, and other related issues. A strong sense that teachers and administrators can make a difference has materialized. For example, after identifying low parental attendance at parent-teacher conferences as a significant problem in the middle school, one group of teachers initiated student-led conferences. The students took the lead in organizing the conference night, which became more than just another school event. The students wrote invitations to their parents, decorated the school cafeteria, and set up dozens of small tables complete with white cloths and flowers. The teachers greeted the parents at the door, escorted them to a table, and gave them a portfolio of the students' work, but they did not intervene unless called to a table. Some parents stayed for more than an hour, talking to their child about their work.

On the negative side, small rifts have at times arisen between project participants and nonparticipants. Cohort members believe that change is needed; nonparticipants often support the status quo. Cohort members speak of hope, substantive change, and a new learning environment, while some non-cohort teachers and administrators have been reluctant to question current practices. The cohort's obvious emerging expertise has been threatening to some faculty and administrators. The school board has received a few anonymous letters criticizing the program and discussed them in open sessions.

Conclusion

The lack of improvement in standardized reading test scores after the first year was problematic for the superintendent and the board. With the recent passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the pressure to show immediate and sustainable results in student achievement has become even greater. Although the authors believe that our approach to school reform has great potential for improving the teaching and learning in Oak Park and has indeed shown many positive results, we are very much aware that it is a long-term approach to a complex problem in a world increasingly fixated on the short term. Improving test scores is the bottom line for any reform effort, and on this measure we are still hopeful about producing positive results.

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